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Exploring Intersections of Queer Artist Identities through Music: A Community Engagement Project

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Exploring Intersections of Queer Artist Identities through Music:

A Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Music Therapy

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Abstract

Members of the LGBTQ+ or Queer community are likely to experience minority stress throughout their lives (Borgogna et al., 2018). This community engagement project explored the intersections of identity among artists in the queer community to better understand how art can be used to heal from minority stress. An all-queer space was created to allow members of the queer community to feel relief from minority stress and speak without feeling judged. Through art making, sharing, discussions, and singing together members of the queer community were able to build resilience and deepen hope. Findings for this project indexed queer artists' use music as a means of validation of experience and suggest the potential to express queer identity through the arts.

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Project

Introduction

In thinking about my thesis, I was forced to undertake a significant amount of self-reflection, not only as a budding music therapist but also in areas of life that will directly affect my work. The intersection of being a queer person, male, and a music therapist were all at the forefront of me doing this project. As I worked through my internal struggle with these intersections, I realized how close my relationship to music was with my identity as a queer person. I found that throughout meaningful periods of my growth and development, I used music to express my queer identity. I was also able to see queer representation in popular music and musical theater, which was validating for my own identity as a young queer person. Seeing other people in the LGBTQ+ community reminded me that my experience was not as different as I first perceived it growing up in a hetero-normative house hold. I was able to find my authentic voice through music and I wondered if other queer artists also experienced this through their own modality.

LGBTQ+ or Queer individuals are more at risk for mental health related issues (Borgogna et al., 2018). This population, particularly by young adults, is at a higher risk of suicidal ideation, isolation, and homelessness (Grzanka, Lanell Bain, & Crowe, 2016; Phillips, 2015). Queer theory suggests that sexual and gender identities are socially constructed and are fluid. The concept of Queer theory challenges the implication of dominant narratives within society and culture that further contribute the interpersonal relationships between LGBTQ+ individuals and family members and broader culture (Hadley, 2013). LGBTQ+ individuals also may struggle with their identity without sufficient support and effective coping strategies.

Socially, there is a stigma identifying with the LGBTQ+ community, which may lead to a feeling of dehumanization for these individuals. These preconceived notions of community often make the movement of LGBTQ+ individuals around the world difficult as gender and sexual orientation are viewed as essential parts of humanness (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). Although mental health practitioners are offering more services to individuals who are a part of this community, more research is needed in order to provide competent care.

LGBTQ+ scholars within the music therapy community are working together to fight the stigma of identifying as a sexual minority and to promote culturally competent practice with clients in the LGBTQ+ community (Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2012). Music can be a space for members of the LGBTQ+ community to express the nuanced variances of what it means to be a part of this community (Grzanka, Lanell Bain, & Crowe, 2016). There has been little research exploring the connections between music, art and being queer. My goal was to explore this connection with members of the LGBTQ+ community through a project involving music and art making and art sharing.

This community engagement project focused on the intersection between artists within the LGBTQ+ or Queer Community and how music and art can build community as well as a stronger sense of self on a personal and communal level. This project sought to address the following questions amongst community participants: How has identifying as LGBTQ impacted your life? How has identifying as an artist impacted your life? When and how did the two intersect? My experience facilitating this project allowed me to better understand community members lived experience and the implications for music therapy with the queer community by exploring the ways that queer artists use art in their lives. The community engagement project found that an all-queer space created a freedom to discuss the implications of identifying as a

sexual minority. Participants shared personal experience through art sharing, and the community members were able to speak on their own personal experience in connection with art. These personal experiences included using art as a way to validate feelings of being queer and putting a voice to experiences that were not talked about growing up in a hetero-normative community. The community members were able to express these nuanced feelings through music and art making, which provided a lasting essence in resiliency and hope.

Literature review

Literature suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals are more at risk for mental health related issues due to minority stress (Borgogna et al., 2018.) The LGBTQ+ community, people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender nonconforming, pansexual, demisexual, asexual, queer, as well as questioning individuals, experience the direct and indirect stress of living in a culture dominated by cis-gendered and heterosexual individuals. Frost, Lehavot, and Meyer (2015) share that “minority stress is based on the premise that (a) prejudice and stigma directed toward LGBT people bring about unique stressors and (b) these stressors cause adverse health outcomes including mental and physical disorders” (p. 209). The prejudice and stigma surrounding the LGBTQ+ community come in the form of micro-aggressions and internalized homophobia. External stressors may include discrimination, bullying, and prejudices based on identity and may manifest through a range of government social policies, religious affiliation, small hurtful comments and condescending looks. The stress and social stigma can also be internalized wherein members of the LGBTQ+ community may experience negative thoughts, emotions, and feelings about one’s self because of their identity. These constant stressors in addition to the everyday stressors experienced by every member of society can be detrimental to a person’s mental health (Borgogna et al., 2018).

Meyer (2015) responds to the significant amount of stress experienced by the LGBTQ+ community in terms of resilience. Resilience, according to Meyer (2015), refers to “the quality of being able to survive and thrive in the face of adversity” (p. 210). Resilience, like coping, is a response to stress and a way to adapt. Being resilient can provide a way to lessen the effects of minority stress. Meyer (2015) also points out the difference between individual and community resilience suggesting that building a resilient community can offer individuals support and resources to cope with minority stress. Unlike individual resilience which is more of a western concept that may lead to a “blame the victim” approach, a resilient community can address the bigger issues like policy change and outreach which will further the community resilience.

There has been a small amount of research done on the connection between the LGBTQ+ community and Arts. Lewis and Seaman (2004), conducted a quantitative study exploring gay men and their affinity to the arts. The 1993 and 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) was used to measure the association between sexual orientation and the arts. The study sample was comprised of 2,014 participants who completed the GSS in the United States. One-hundred and four of these participants answered that they have had at least one same-sex partner since the age of 18. The GSS contained questions about leisure activities like going to an art museum, attending a dance performance, and attending a classical music performance. Researcher findings pointed to a higher percentage of LGB individuals who answered that they participate in the arts over heterosexual individuals. Although participant demographics such as education, income, age, gender, marital status and religion were assessed, no significant evidence as to why LGB individuals were more likely to be involved in the Arts. Researchers recognized inherent limitations in using the GSS. These limitations included the lack of identifying features for the LGBTQ+ community on this survey as well as being self reported participants may not have

answered truthfully about their sexual identity, which would have increased the understanding of this topic.

Aronoff and Gilboa (2015), in their qualitative inquiry explored the use of music before and during the “coming out” process. “Coming out” is a common process for individuals in the LGBTQ+ community in which a person reveals their sexuality to someone else (Cramer,1995). The reasons from “coming out” may be that they are fed up with social isolation, not wanting to keep a secret anymore, or being forced out of the closet. The homosexual identity is formed in stages of; (1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride, and (6) identity synthesis (Cass,1984). Researchers interviewed seven gay men from different cultural backgrounds and asked them to describe their “coming out” process and if music played a role. Through the study, they found three main roles for music during participants’ process: (a) music as companion, (b) music as means for concealing and exposing, and (c) music as means of making change. Participants’ responses revealed that music often had a significant impact on the “coming out” process. Music was used to fill the void of a lonely world, allowing gay adolescence to feel like they had someone who shared a similar experience to them and who was able to give voice to intimate thoughts and secrets and provide empathy, support, and containment. “You feel that music is like your spokesman, a representative of the world that tells you – ‘hey, listen, you can do this” (Aronoff & Gilboa,2015, p. 428). Researchers suggested that, like Winnicott’s, (1965) “true self” and “false self,” music can often be considered “straight music” or “gay music.” Participants may listen to “straight music” when not wanting their sexual identity to be exposed and listening to “gay music” as a means of helping participants to be authentically themselves and strengthen their sexual identity to assist in the “coming out” process. Music was additionally seen as a

catalyst to coming out. Interviewees describe this as music giving them the power to make a change.

Along with exploring the individual connection to Art, researchers also point to the importance of building community through music and art. Henderson and Hodges (2007) used a phenomenological approach to look at individual experiences of men who sing in an all-gay choir and comparing it to a classical approach to community. The goal was to obtain a better understanding of how community was formed amongst choir members and how their community built a bridge to the dominant community. The study took place in an urban city in Oklahoma, using a combination of interviews and observation. Participants were compared to existing benchmarks in community, social interaction, shared ties, and area context. Through the study, Henderson and Hodges (2007) found that experiences in a choir of marginalized individuals, matched benchmarks to create community. This researchers suggested that the all-gay choir gave opportunities for social interaction with people who shared similar views. The choir offered a place for participants who may have not been comfortable with their sexuality to have a sense of purpose. Additionally, many choir members perceived music, singing, and being gay as shared ties. The researchers also pointed out that area of context is important and provides space for members to rehearse. The choir had a semi-professional space to rehearse, which gave legitimacy to the rehearsals. The group was able to rehearse in a closed space and then choose to perform in public. The members spoke to this experience as building up the courage with the group to share their music and be out in public. All of these points gave a better understanding of how a choir can serve to build community for marginalized groups.

Over recent years, authors have suggested the utilization of queer theory within community music therapy (Grzanka, Lanell Bain & Crowe, 2016). Community music therapy

has been highlighted as an anti-oppressive practice because participants engage fully in the construction of the therapeutic activity and milieu rather than a less community-centered approach in which therapy is put on them or done to them (Baines, 2013). Baines (2003) conducted a qualitative study on community based music therapy program in a community mental health program. The program goals were to decrease isolation, increase community development, increase empowerment and communication skills, enhance creativity and quality of life, and fulfill consumer driven initiatives. The music therapy interventions included singing familiar songs and improvisation with brief verbal processing. The community also offered a “talent show” where group members can perform a song to share their experience with a group, some of which invite the audience to participate. According to the results, the music therapy consumers primarily attended the group for relaxation. Other comments indicate that music therapy groups foster socialization, fun, and a sense of belonging. “Music may be used as individual or psychological empowerment, but it may also form part of an empowerment process on group or societal levels” (Rolvjord, 2006, p.106).

There are a number of complexities when exploring identity with the LGBTQ+ community, however arts-based research is a way to give a broader picture of the exploration. In Leavy’s (2009) arts-based research study, she explored body image and conceptions of masculinity and femininity with college aged students. Utilizing a feminist social constructivist view, she created two sets of six “tri-voiced” poems based on two sets of interviews with college-aged women. The first sets of interviews were with heterosexual women regarding body image and conceptions of femininity and masculinity and the second set were with women who identified as homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual regarding body image and sexual-gender identities. The term “tri-voiced” was explained to be poems written based on original interview

data, existing literature, and autoethnographic researcher observations. The poems highlighted prevalent themes when working through body image, identity, masculinity and femininity, and the role media plays into stereotyping women and men into specific images. “Media screens of femininity bounce on the boys eyes, And when I look at them, Looking at me, That is what I see” (p.1440). Many of the poems spoke about society and how the view of gender is embedded in our culture through fairytales and advertisements. The last poem titled, “Dark Prince” spoke about searching for a dark prince, “to create, inspire, and write me into life” (P.1447). She compared this to Ariel who traded her voice for a man. She realized that a man did not give her what she desired instead she has to search for that dark prince within herself. This related to the theme of someone not matching up with the societal norms and that person is made an outsider and assumed to appear as a specific gender. Although the themes present in Leavy’s poems (2009) speak directly to women interviewed, they additionally point to common themes LGBTQ+ people face regularly. People of all genders may feel the societal pressure to present as a specific gender.

In an arts-based inquiry, Phillips (2015), explores the topic of suicide among young gay men. Phillips’ work stems from four stories: (a) a call for qualitative researchers to promote change, (b) poetry as a critical voice, (c) stories of suicides among gay youth (10-25), and (d) the author’s own personal story as a closeted gay man. He notes that, “people who identify as gay or are perceived as gay are at least attempting (if not committing) suicide at a higher level than those who do not identify as gay or are not perceived as gay” (Phillips, 2015, p. 113). The stories and statistics woven into poetry detailed the seriousness of this issue. Many stories are noted to discuss the impact of bullying and suicide amongst gay youth; however, Phillips points to the lack of resolution or thought on these matters and urges future researchers to continue

where he left off. Phillips (2015) wove together facts, stories, and poems to suggest that arts-based research is the way to understand multiple and diverse ways of living in the world and that critical inquiry and poetry should usher change.

Austin's (2008) writings on vocal improvisation points to the ways voice can be used to instill a sense of self in one's identity. Vocal psychotherapy is used to gain insight, increase self-awareness, building a sense of identity, self-expression, and improve interpersonal skills. (Clements-Cortès, 2013). Vocal holding is an improvisational technique that includes structure to get the clients comfortable with improvisation. The therapist plays two chords on the piano in a rocking motion. The therapist improvises with the client and sings the root known as grounding or repeats what is being sung known as mirroring. These techniques give the client a sense of safety and security (Austin, 2008). Group vocal improvisation is a combination of group instrumental improvisation and group singing familiar songs. Group vocal improvisation can increase self-expression, social interaction, hope belonging and acceptance as well as empowerment, motivation, and quality of life (Pujol, 2017).

Methods

For the purpose of this study, I meet with four LGBTQ+ identifying artists. The community engagement project took place during one session at the Washburn Lounge on Lesley University's Brattle campus. The Meyer (2015) article presented rationale to do a community engagement project with the LGBTQ+ community instead of individual sessions or interviews. A goal for the project is to build a sense of community resilience in order for the individuals to feed from that energy and take that with them in their everyday life.

Participants. Participants were invited to attend a community engagement project at Lesley exploring the intersection of queer artists. The participants invited were known artists in

the community and areas surrounding Boston. Many of which I have worked with through theater productions and other music groups. The participants self-identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. There were no specific criteria to decide if the participants were considered artists or not, however the participants all identified with the term artist within their own modalities; music, theater, writing, visual art.

There were four participants who attended the project two of which identified as gay males and the other two who identified as lesbian females. The participants all previously knew one another, which created a strong connection and rapport. Interestingly, the group had never discussed or participated in a project that discussed the intersections between queer artist identities before this engagement.

Interventions. I decided to do a community engagement project on the intersections of identity for queer artist because of my own experience in becoming a music therapist. Through my journey, I found that I was able to express my queer identity through music more successfully than any other medium. Using Austin's (2008) holding techniques, vocal improvisation provided the structure as well as the flexibility I needed to explore my queer identity. This process grounded me in my identity and gave space to explore the fluidity of being queer. Artistic pieces also contributed to the understanding of my queer identity. My hope was to create a community space that would allow participants to share their intersecting identities as LGBTQ+ and artists through group vocal improvisation using holding techniques, free writing, verbal group processing, art sharing, visual art-making, and a group song chosen by the facilitator.

Procedures. Prior to the study, participants were asked to bring in a piece of art (e.g. song, poem, monologue, painting, or sculpture) that held significance to their identity in the

LGBTQ+ community. These notifications were shared via Facebook, word of mouth, and phone reminders calls. Upon arrival to the Washburn Lounge where the project was held, participants found art supplies and musical instruments set up in the middle of a small circle with chairs. There was a piano off to the side that was used throughout. The project began with basic introductions as a way to build rapport and begin building the community. Next, community members were asked to engage in a group vocal improvisation. The rationale being that vocal improvisation can help to build community, to increase self-expression using the voice, and used as a way to ground the individuals in their sense of self. The group was then given time to process the experience by free writing in a journal and verbal discussion. This was followed by community members' creation and sharing of visual art pieces. The verbal discussion continued about the visual art sharing process. Then the group was asked to engage in an improvisatory multi-modal art making session based on the themes of the day as a way to continue to build community and strengthen the individual and group ability to make change in the greater society. To finish, the group was invited to sing a group song chosen by the facilitator to create a lasting sense of empowerment and provide another opportunity for reflection.

Results

The community engagement project was a new opportunity for group members to participate in an all-queer space. This space provided them the freedom to speak and express without fear of judgment. The first activity was a group vocal improvisation as a way to build group cohesion and increase self-expression. During the first music making activity, I played the chords D major to C major on the piano alternating each measure and switching up dynamics, texture, and expression based off the energy in the room. A few of the community members were reluctant to begin. This may have been due to self-consciousness with their own voice

because the voice is personal to one's being and identity. Members, however, did find their way into the music eventually using neutral syllables and humming that aligned in rhythm with the piano. There were also members who had the opposite response; one member became engulfed in the music making and began singing throughout his range improvising complex melodies that blended seamlessly with the piano chords and the other participants singing. These individuals were able to fully embody the music and use it as self-expression. As the facilitator, I also participated in the vocal improvisation as well as played the piano. I used my voice to model my own self-expression, mirror what others were doing to validate their processes, and varied the syllables and style to promote different areas of self-expression.

The vocal improvisation naturally found an ending into silence. I asked the group to free write about that experience. I also participated in this free-write. My free write consisted of a list of words, "Mmmm, Ahhh, Dissonance, unison, space, distance, high, low, loud, soft, slowing breath, grounding, opposites, similar, space in between, dichotomy, breathe, breathe, breathe." This highlighted the information for my own personal journey as a queer artist. What emerged were opposites and black and white thinking. I began to think about how identifying as queer puts me in the middle of many opposites beginning with, the idea that people are assumed to be straight or gay. The idea that there is no in between or exploration of the grey area caused me distress in my early life, as I knew that I did not identify as straight. However, the label of gay did not resonate or feel authentic to me either. I felt like I had to choose and make a decision that would decide my sexual orientation and gender identity for my entire life. I felt societal pressure to come out as gay or present as straight. I never understood why there seemed to be a rush for me to select one of two identities. Nonetheless, I was interested to hear what the other community members experienced during their process. Participants shared personal narratives

they felt and histories that were accessed only because of our initial community building conversation, vocal improvisation and free write.

The group was able to share their own perspective of their experience during the vocal improvisation. Each member had a different interpretation of the improvisation. This highlighted the power of the group vocal improvisation to reinforce the individual process in a group context. Each individual wrote about something that was “on top” for them. I asked the group to relate the vocal improvisation to being a queer artist. Participants were booming with conversation and there were many paralleled experiences brought up that each member of the community could relate to.

The first topic that emerged was the connection between the queer community and the queer individual. The group was able to talk openly about what an all-queer space is and what it provides. Initially, the queer community can provide protection from the oppression of the typical hetero society. The members spoke about feeling unable to show their authentic self in the world and how they were able to let down their guard when willingly participating and being in an all-queer space. The queer community also provides strength and a sense of belonging for its members. This has to do with shared empathy between people who have experienced similar feelings. The strength and resilience of the community as a whole can feed the individual. This is a circular cycle that also allows the individual to help and strengthen the community.

The group transitioned to discuss the intersection of queer artists. One member spoke about how both queer people and artists often have their voice taken away and told that their opinion is less than. The entire group agreed on this. Queer artists often use art as a response to a traumatic event. For example, the play *Angels in America* was written as a response to the AIDS epidemic (Altman & Buse, 2012). The group discussed how many great pieces of art

would not have been created if it were not for these traumatic events. On the other hand, these events should have been avoided in the first place. However, Queer artists have been using art to heal as a community from the beginning. This has been consistent throughout art forms as a way to grieve, provide strength or resilience. Queer artists have also been using art to rebel against the dominant society and create a sense of joy for being queer. One member brought up how identifying as gay has brought much joy to his life because he is free to be who he is and it does not matter what others believe. The idea that joy is just as radical as fear, guilt and shame was proposed and intriguing.

The group brought up an interesting point about all-queer spaces. Initially, queer spaces were created in bars and nightclubs. Being queer was not socially acceptable like it is present day. Queer people who could not be “out” in everyday life could come to these clubs and express themselves freely, creating an underground community. Today, many queer people are “out” in their everyday lives and it seems there is less of a need for queer bars and nightclubs. In addition with the recent Pulse nightclub shooting, queer individuals are cautious when it comes to going out and participating in queer nightlife (Adams, 2018). The group noted that all-queer spaces are still important and serve a purpose to contemporary LGBTQ+ communities but it was also noted by participants that it is imperative for the purpose of these spaces to evolve and change with the times. Being queer is becoming more socially acceptable and with marriage equality, it seems as though we are progressing forward as a united society. Many queer people still experience prejudice and micro aggressions as well as internalized homophobia due to societal pressure and gender norms. All-queer spaces are doing their part to support people through this civil rights movement and provide a space that not only feels safe but allows community members to be brave.

The community members continued to share similar experience and histories as queer individuals. There was a sense of freedom in the room to speak on queer topics, have those ideas heard and engage in a conversation that had investment on equal ends. There was a feeling of relief after our discussion and it felt as if a weight had been lifted from the group. The group was more connected and vulnerable. Many participants shared statements about how wonderful this opportunity was and how empowered they felt from this discussion and platform.

The next part of the community engagement project involved sharing a piece of art that holds personal significance to your identity of a queer artist. The first example was the poem, “Still, I Rise” by Maya Angelou (1978). He spoke about feeling like he could relate to the poem as he could see some of himself in the poem. He shared about how the poem speaks to the perseverance, strength, and history of any oppressed group of people. The poem was able to give him the voice for the feelings he was having. He also shared that this poem includes the joy that comes from speaking your truth and how that joy is radical. This paralleled earlier conversations and reinforced our connection as a queer community. “Does my sexiness upset you? Does it come as a surprise, That I dance like I've got diamonds, At the meeting of my thighs?” (Angelou, 1978).

Another member shared Roald Dahl’s *Matilda* (1988). She spoke about being little and how she often felt different and disconnected from others. She was able to see herself in the character of Matilda and empathize with Matilda’s feelings and narrative. She especially identified with Matilda overcoming her feelings of being scared, ashamed, and alone. She shared how she found her own Miss Honey in her life that was able to support her. She shared how her Miss Honey was able to serve as a positive role model during this difficult transition. She also mentioned creating her own world in computer games like the Sims and how she was

able to make people and life the way she wanted. The same participant also stated that she looks up to icons like Lady Gaga, who performed music and are seen as allies for the queer community.

The next piece of art was a song that allowed the participant to escape from the shame of being a lesbian, *Cool Thanks* by Julia Nunes (2015). She shared how she always knew she was not straight and this song and lyrics provided a connection and understanding that aligned with her feelings. The song lyrics identify how building resilience and having thick skin are part of the “coming out” process. The participant connected with many of the ideas and perspective from the song: building up walls is a way of survival. “Manners are lost on me, I find it exhaustingly pointless to be so polite, I'd rather just fight, Get it out of your system, So we can move on, I can take it, I'm Strong” (Nunes, 2015).

The next member shared a song with us by performing, *Open Road* from the musical *Glory Days* by Nick Blaemire and James Gardiner (2008). This song tells the story of a boy on a road trip journey where he realizes his sexuality when he meets another boy. He shared about how this song gave him a feeling of catharsis when performing as he can relate to the story and he can feel that freedom within himself. He paralleled his own process with the song as he has been longing to go on a journey and he can relate to the stubbornness expressed in the song. The song focused on the qualities that are present as opposed to what he does not have. The lyrics were also meaningful because it uses the phrase, “beautiful boy.” In hetero-normative society boys are handsome. The group of participants indicated how the choice of word “beautiful” allowed for a more open understanding and idea of this boy and their own personal experience. This is an uncommon phrase for individuals in a hetero-normative society but quite the opposite for a community of queer individuals.

“We learned about each other's lives, As we talked all through the night, And when he thought the time was right, He kissed me in the car, Beneath the starless sky, And with that kiss, He opened up my mind. And we went driving, We were driving, We were driving. Just me, A beautiful boy, And the Open Road” (Blaemire & Gardiner, 2008).

Next, I shared my piece that holds significance to me identifying as a queer artist. This song was *I'll Cover You* from the musical *Rent* by Jonathon Larson (1996). The song is a duet by a homosexual couple in the show and their relationship is written as the strongest in the show. This makes it heartbreaking when one of them dies from AIDS in the second act. The lyrics in the song speak to the protection one can find in a queer relationship and how two queer people can support each other through difficult times. “I think they meant it, When they said you can't buy love, Now I know you can rent it, A new lease you are my love, On life, oh my life” (Larson, 1996). I shared about how *Rent* has come up at poignant times in my development, when I was in middle school the movie came out and I could see people on the screen that I identified with. In high school, I performed in the show and that was my first on-stage homosexual kiss. Most recently, *Rent Live* came out during the time of this thesis and I was able to continue my connection with this show by exploring its significance in my life.

The group shared about this experience as we prepared for the art-making portion of the engagement project. We discussed the themes of the day and I invited the participants to create art. The themes we came up with were Individual, Strength, Empathy, Collective Voice, Bold, Protection, Vulnerability, and Unity Through Art. Based on these themes, the group chose to create visual art using pastels, markers, and colored pencils. Each member created their own piece that furthered their experience of the project. The art produced contained many colors and images that represent building the queer community. One member created a tree with multiples

colors that he shared represent all of the different perspectives of the queer community and how we can all come together to build up the community as a whole. I have included the artwork I created. It included the words “Still we rise” as that phrase stuck out to me throughout the project. I can appreciate how resilient the queer community is as will continue to be. This has given me strength to persist even when feeling like the world is working against me. Every member of the queer community has their own story that is extremely personal to one’s journey. Although these stories may be different, there is a common empathy shared among the members of this community that is able to connect us. Despite the backlash from society and the current administration, we still rise and persist. That is what I wanted to highlight in my artwork (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Artistic Response

The project ended with a group song called, I've got a light. This is a short folk-like song about how everyone has a light and they have to let it shine. The group stood in a circle and I accompanied on guitar. I taught the song and invited the group to sing out and create harmony especially on the lyrics, "Gotta let it shine," the word shine was held out for seven beats driving home the point that our voices in connection with music allow our authentic selves to shine. I shifted the dynamics in my guitar playing to keep the group engaged. "I gotta light, you gotta light, everybody's got a light so let it shine. Let it shine, let it glow, whatever you do don't let it hide, Gotta let it shine" As we repeated the last line, the voices in the group became stronger and it began sounding like a mantra or affirmation to "Let It Shine." The song ended with a strong collective energy of hope for the community that everyone was committed to holding on to.

Discussion

The purpose of this community engagement project was to explore the intersections of identity of the queer artist to further understand the implications for queer music therapy. The approach to understanding included discussion, art sharing, and arts processing. The project gave space for the community members to speak about the oppression of being a sexual minority in an all-queer space, which built a sense of community. The project also suggests that the queer community can use the arts to build resilience as in providing queer representation in the media, providing an escape for pressures of a hetero-dominate culture, and provide validation to express what it means to be queer. Identifying as queer comes with an amount of minority stress, which can be frequently observed; however, through community and the Arts the queer community can continue to be resilient.

The findings of the current project on how the queer community can use art, closely resemble the Aronoff and Gilboa article (2015), that shared Art may have been used as a

companion, or to conceal or expose, and even as a means of change in the coming out process. Perhaps, members of the queer community can continue to use art as a companion, or to conceal or expose, or as a means of change way beyond the coming out process. When the community members were sharing their art, many expressed that art was a way to provide validation for being queer and not feeling alone. This is congruent with art being used as a companion (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015). The community members also shared that art gave a voice to the feelings of being queer as well as promoting change for the greater society. This continues to align with art to expose and means of change. The current project did not find that art was used to conceal the queer identity. Perhaps, this could be because all the community members in this project were “out”, meaning they identified as queer in their everyday lives. The participants did not require art to help conceal their identity. If the current project included members who were not fully “out”, then it is possible that art may have been used as a way to conceal.

The next finding included the importance of an all-queer space. Having a homogenous group of members of the queer community, there was freeness to the conversation and the art sharing that allowed for certain vulnerability. A member described this at a later date as a brave space. He compared it to the many “safe” spaces at schools and other organizations. He suggested that saying “safe” implied that queer communities have been victimized. He looked to reframe this idea to include “brave” space, which includes the courage necessary to come out and be visibly queer. The articles Henderson and Hodges (2007) and Grzanka, Lanell Bain & Crowe (2016), both explore how an all-queer space can build community, create connections, and allow members to space express the minority stress of being queer. The current project set up an all-queer space that provided opportunity to speak without the fear of being judged. There was a unique collective energy in the room that is hard to describe using words, which could be

why the art and singing provided such meaning for the members. This highlights the need for all-queer spaces in the greater community as well as the need for arts to be used with this community.

The final art making and song left the group with a communal feeling of hope for the community that probably would not be as powerful with only the use of verbal processing. This aligned with the Phillips article (2015), which suggested that poetry could leave space for the reader and communicate with the reader rather than to the reader. Art can allow space for the nuances of what it means to identify as queer and provide a communal feeling that can last longer than not using art (Phillips, 2015). The community members also felt comfortable being in the creative space, using the arts to express rather than verbal dialogue. The lyrics of a song, poetry, and creative writing are all words that leave space for nuanced emotion. This is perhaps why Leavy (2009), used poetry to express the complexities of gender and sexuality.

There were several limitations to the current project many of which could not be avoided. The first are my innate implicit biases toward the community as I identify as part of the community. This could be looked at as a benefit as I can use my own process to further understand others; however, there may have been other aspects noticed if the facilitator did not identify as part of the community. Another limitation was the small amount of members who attended the engagement project. This project did not hope to create broad statements that could encompass the whole community. Instead, there was a core value to access a few individuals in the community. Although, the small number of participants may have enabled members to more readily share their experiences and connect on a deeper level than if the group was larger, many identities of the queer community were not represented in the project. Further investigation should include individuals who identify as bi-sexual, transgender, gender nonconforming, pansexual, demisexual, asexual, as well as questioning individuals. As a result this project,

provided a narrow understanding of the community as a whole, leaving out important information about diverse LGBTQ+ experiences.

The current community engagement project only consisted of one day of meeting. This was another limitation of the project. Having more meetings could provide a more in-depth experience for the members and more findings for the project. Future research could explore the evolution between multiple meetings and observe changes overtime to see the implications toward the queer community. The community engagement project could also look further into arts-based research on the topic of queer identity. From the research and the engagement day, Arts-based projects can highlight the complex feelings of identifying as queer. One of the limitations of the current project is that there were multiply modalities present. Further research may consider doing arts-based research through a single modality, for instance music to foster a more in depth understanding on queer identity. As well as throughout multiply meetings to observe the nuances innate in arts-based research.

In conclusion, queer artists often have their voices diminished through the hetero-dominant society. By using the arts, members of the queer community can strengthen their collective voice, which has an affect on the individual and the greater community. Through art and queer representation, queer individuals can feel validated in their feelings that go against the dominant narrative. Providing an all-queer space can offer individuals relief from the minority stress and including group art making can shift feelings into that of hope and resilience. The implications of this current project promote music and expressive therapies for members of the queer community who experience minority stress, which may lead to mental health disorders. Creating the space for the queer community to express and make connections will instill hope and resilience between the individual and the greater community.

Epilogue

The essence of this community engagement project still resonates with my clinical and personal work. Throughout my mental health internship, I have worked with several members of the queer community. While I did not have the means to set up an all-queer space, the knowledge and experience of the project provided me with the understanding of the minority stress LGBTQ+ clients may experience. I have an understanding that members of this community are more likely to experience mental health issues, abuse substances, and complete suicide. I am able to be present with these clients while they discuss LGBTQ+ issues. It also gave me the courage to speak about this topic to other professionals and be an advocate for this population in the mental health community.

Throughout this process, I have also become more confident in discussing my queer identity to colleagues as well as clients when it is appropriate to disclose. I found that being queer is a significant part of my identity that I cannot simply, “leave it at door”. If I am trying to conceal my identity while working with clients, I am not modeling authenticity. Most of the time this conversation does not come up, however having this understanding allows me to be more present with clients and be prepared for when the question does come up.

I also have a strong desire to work with members of the queer community in the future. I look forward to setting up all queer spaces for art making, facilitating support groups, and continuing the research regarding this topic. The LGBTQ+ community is constantly becoming more present in the media as well as the mental health field. The conversation is far from over and I will continue to be an advocate for this community in the music therapy field.

Within my personal work, I am still in touch with the members of this community engagement project and every time I speak to them, there is a deeper connection than before this

project. The freedom and non-judgmental energy still remain in our relationship even when we are not discussing the project. I have recalled the support of this project for myself when I am not feeling great. I am thankful that I built up my social support system and can recall on the collective feeling of empowerment and hope. This project held a strong connection to my work as a clinical mental health counselor in music therapy. I look forward to cultivating conversations and creating more art about the queer community and music therapy.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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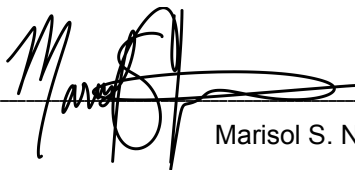
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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marisol S. Norris', written over a horizontal line.

Marisol S. Norris